



BETTER ATHLETES
BETTER PEOPLE

PCA Q&A

Sharon Robinson

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and Vice Chairman of the One Love Foundation in honor of Yeardeley Love**

One Love was created in 2010 to honor the memory of Yeardeley Love, a University of Virginia senior lacrosse player who was beaten to death by her ex-boyfriend just weeks before graduation. After her death, Yeardeley's family and friends were surprised to learn these statistics:



- One in three women and one in four men will be in a violent relationship in their lifetime
- Nearly 50% of these women and 40% of these men experience relationship violence for the first time between ages 18-24
- Young women ages 16-24 are at three times the risk for abuse

One Love's mission is to end relationship abuse by educating young people about healthy and unhealthy relationship behaviors and empowering them to be leaders driving change in their communities.

Q | 1 What signs should coaches and parents look for to determine whether their athletes/children might be in unhealthy romantic relationships, and what should coaches and parents do if they suspect an unhealthy romantic relationship?

A As a coach, I know how much we care for our players, and because we spend so much time with our athletes, we have a front-row view into their lives.

One of the early indications that something may be wrong is if the personality of the player changes, or if he/she seems withdrawn and is isolating himself/herself from the team. If an athlete who is usually on time and eager to work hard in practice suddenly starts showing up late with a negative attitude, something could be wrong. If your team's social butterfly isn't as talkative as they once were, it may be time to check in with her.

Signs that someone is in an unhealthy relationship can be subtle – but since we are sometimes privy to situations that the parents are not, it is important to follow up by checking in on a player directly, or asking other team members if they know of anything afloat. Identifying these signs early is the key to preventing an unhealthy relationship from escalating into a dangerous situation.

How do you check in with a player on such a sensitive subject? Tell them specifically why you are concerned, and ask them how they're feeling so that you can instigate a conversation about their problem.

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Questions as simple as, “You seem a little down these days, is everything okay?” or even, “What’s going on? I’ve noticed you seem to be a little different these days,” are helpful ways to open a conversation without being judgmental. **People who experience unhealthy relationships typically feel ashamed and powerless and often believe the situation is their fault.** Asking questions in this open manner is a simple way to create a comfortable space for the student-athlete to be honest. Throughout your conversation, maintain a tone of open, patient, non-judgmental support. If the young person wants to stop talking, respect that wish and state that you are there if/when they are ready to talk.

In most cases, the first conversation will not lead to immediate resolution. Unhealthy and abusive relationships can be very complex, and because the victim often is controlled and manipulated into blaming himself/herself, there isn’t a quick fix. Addressing your concern can open the player’s eyes to the problem, and can be a start to getting out.

In order to encourage your players to continue speaking to you, end every conversation with a statement of validation, support, and an open invitation to talk any time: “Thank you for sharing this with me, anyone in this situation would feel the same, and if you ever want to talk about it again, you know I’m here for you no matter what.” It is critical to establish yourself as a trusted resource and a safe haven during the volatile process of exiting an abusive relationship.

Q | 2 What can athletes do if they are concerned they are in an unhealthy (e.g., emotionally abusive) relationship with their coach?

A Unhealthy situations can exist in any relationship – with friends, colleagues, parents, partners, or even coaches. If someone believes they may be in an unhealthy relationship with a coach, they should speak to someone close to them about the specific behaviors they are experiencing – this person could be a fellow teammate, friend, parent, or other trusted adult. **They can also reach out to resources at the school dedicated to relationship violence, or a national hotline such as Love is Respect.** They should provide specific examples of the unhealthy behaviors that they are experiencing. As abusive coaches may have many victims, reach out to former or current players to understand their perspective, share your story, and see if they have had similar experiences.

Making formal allegations against a coach takes courage and can be challenging in several ways. For legal reasons, if the athlete confides in someone within the school that is not a stated confidential resource (such as a counselor, psychologist, or Title IX resource), that confidante may be required to report the coach’s behavior to an administrator, which could begin disciplinary proceedings against the coach.

Emotional abuse, sexual harassment, and the like are Title IX infractions that prohibit discrimination or limitation in any educational program or activity funded by federal financial assistance. In some cases, school procedure doesn’t properly address the infraction, leaving the athlete to continue dealing with the unhealthy behavior. In other cases, fellow athletes who have not had the same experience will make their disagreements known and social retribution can follow.

Reporting a coach’s unhealthy behavior requires strength, but if there is a real problem, it is worth it for your team’s comfort and safety. As in any unhealthy relationship, know that the situation is not your fault, and seek out resources to support you, whether that’s friends, family, and/or official resources.

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Q | 3 What are some ways to support a teammate you are concerned might be in an unhealthy relationship?

- A** If you suspect your teammate is in an unhealthy relationship, it's important to establish an open and supportive dialogue with this person. Just as a parent or a coach, a teammate can check in with the other teammate, asking questions about specific behaviors that concern you. This strategy can apply whether you fear your teammate is experiencing an unhealthy relationship or perpetrating some unhealthy behaviors.

These situations can be incredibly difficult, and most schools have resources to help if you suspect a friend is in need. Never hesitate to seek out a resource or additional help, whether that comes in the form of a hotline or online resource, mutual friends, a coach, or a confidential resource at school. It is important to get help from a trusted resource who can also make sure you're taking care of yourself during this stressful time.

As peers, teammates and friends, recognize what an enormous amount of influence you have over one another. **Standing quietly by and watching an unhealthy relationship perpetuate can be perceived by the victim as endorsing the relationship.** You also don't want to come in too strong saying things such as, "You could do so much better," or, "Why are you with someone who makes you feel this way?" because that could put the victim in defensive mode and they will close off communication.

Those statements also mimic abusive behaviors: trying to force someone to feel a certain way and judging them to manipulate their actions. By contrast, try to offer non-judgmental support, using open-ended questions such as, "How are things between you two?" or, "I noticed you seemed upset on the phone, is everything okay?" or, "There are some great resources on campus and I am happy to go with you to learn more." This will help your teammate feel safe and understood.

Q | 4 What are healthy communication and boundaries between coaches and athlete?

- A** The best coaches get to know their players well and treat them with respect every day. While college teams spend considerably more time together than high school teams or youth teams, coaches are influential role models in their players' lives. Coaches must understand this responsibility and try to model healthy relationships based on safety, trust, and respect.

Q | 5 How can sports provide life skills that lead to healthy adult relationships?

- A** Sports provide important skills, habits and self-confidence that can transfer over to virtually every other area of life. We see some of the same skills at the very core of both sports and healthy relationships.

Communication: Clear communication is critical on the field and off, teaching athletes how to speak openly and respectfully to another person. While there are ups and downs in any sports season and in any relationship, communication is key to getting over those hurdles with friends, family and eventually co-workers.

Balance: Student-athletes learn the importance of balance to excel at both school and sports, and in learning to play different roles to do what is best for the team. Similarly, healthy relationships have a give-and-take, and shouldn't hijack your entire life.

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Healthy Conict Resolution: Practicing good sportsmanship and healthy conflict resolution is inevitable when you are playing on a team, and the same principles apply to relationships in life.

Teamwork: Sports teams and romantic relationships are alike in that they only work well when there is a common goal and everyone involved is equally invested in reaching it. Teamwork requires constant communication, mutual support and dedication to success – the exact same ingredients for a healthy relationship.

If you would like to bring One Love's Escalation Workshop to your team, school or community please contact the One Love Foundation at info@joinonelove.org or 1.844.TEAM1LV.

For more Resources, visit: www.PCDevZone.org
For more information on Positive Coaching Alliance, visit: www.PositiveCoach.org